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Family Literacy Practices: Adults' Dual Roles of Student and Teacher in the Literacy Development of Their Children

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Keywords: family literacy practices

Abstract: The purpose of this round table is to engage the audience in discussions about the literacy practices of families where the adult learner is also the teacher of literacy in the home. It will call attention to the dual roles of the parent as student and teacher of literacy and the challenges and opportunities inherent in such practices.

Background and Related Literature

Children from homes which contain literate environments are more likely to become successful readers in schools (Strickland & Walker, 2004). Many studies estimate the percentage of children who fail to read proficiently by the end of primary school to be 20-25% of the school population. Theories abound as to the causes of reading difficulties. One theory suggests that most academically successful students have family literacy practices that are more similar with school literacy practices (Ashton, 2002). According to Baker (2003), another theory advocates that parental support is associated with voluntary school reading by students. Research studies have found it important to provide assistance to children in the home environment (Collins & Matthey, 2001). Research on the home literacy practices of adult learners' families is important for families to grow and provide additional perspectives of parents and struggling readers.

Oftentimes, parents of low socio-economic status (SES) are also adult learners in General Education Development (GED), family literacy, basic skills, and other development programs for low literate adults, as well as teachers of literacy for their children. Many parents of struggling readers are not skilled readers themselves. According to a survey administered to teachers and parents about the roles parents played in literacy, 92% of teachers believed the parental role is one of support, but 34% of the parents saw their role in their child's literacy development was one of teaching. A cultural disconnect exists between teachers' and parents' views of the parental role in the literacy development of family members (Baker, 2003). Studies have shown that parental support is associated with greater amounts of voluntary reading by students in intermediate grades (Baker, 2003). Parental beliefs relate to home literacy practices, children's reading achievement, and motivation for reading.

Family literacy is a literacy-focused, time-specific activity that brings together different family members to work on a common theme for a planned activity in which adults and children work and learn collaboratively (Pahl & Kelly, 2005). Family literacy practices in the home environment include daily living routines, entertainment, school-related activities, interpersonal communication, literacy for the sake of teaching or learning literacy, storybook reading, religion, participating in information networks, and work (Purcell-Gates, L'Allier, & Smith, 1995).

According to Purcell-Gates, et al. (1995) a study reveals that both low- and high-literacy families, who are similar in SES, vary within their practices in the family/home context. The high-literacy families used print to permeate their lives and mediate most family activities, such as literacy-learning, storybook reading, and entertainment. The low-literacy families use print

only when it is relevant to some of their lives; the majority of which fell into the categories of entertainment and daily living routines (Purcell-Gates, et.al, 1995).

Research Questions

The primary research question is what are the family literacy practices of parents and children, where the parent is also a learner of literacy? Subsidiary questions include the following: a) what are the current literacy practices of parents in and out of the home environment? b) What are the current family literacy practices of the children in the home environment? c) How do parents and children together engage in the practice of literacy?

Methodology

Basic interpretive qualitative inquiry of semi-structured, open-ended interviews was used to examine the family literacy practices that parents engage in with their children. The sample for this study included 12 adult learner participants, both male and female, in a GED program in Bryan, Texas, who are also parents to young children.

Demographic data was compiled in a chart form to see which interview participants worked full-time and part-time, their gender, age, number and age of children. Interviews were transcribed and organized in a matrix for the purpose of cross-analyzing the data to determine common themes after comparing participant responses and demographic data.

Findings

Findings reveal that parents with high literacy levels and an interest in reading foster the literacy development of their children more than parents with low literacy levels and a moderate interest in reading; however, parents who work full-time and have a high literacy level counter this finding because time is limited to engage in literacy practices with their children. Parents were found to engage in literacy practices both in the home and outside of the home environment at school, church, family member's houses, or work; however their engagement once again depends on the need for text and their literacy levels.

The texts that most parents read are associated with daily living routines, such as the newspaper and television listings and entertainment, such as magazines. Some parents expressed difficulty reading and discouragement sometimes when reading to their children. Few parents noted having an interest in reading for fun. All participants have children's books within the home environment, and children of school age have a set homework/reading time while those under the age of five play as their main learning activity.

Conclusion

Family literacy practices between adult learning parents and their children are evident both inside and outside of the home environment. The level of engagement for literacy between parents and children in the home environment depends on the parents' literacy levels, their interest in reading, and their schedules. Interestingly, parents who are in GED programs are developing their own literacy skills while at the same time fostering those of their children.

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The remainder of references are available upon request.